

Chuck Kleinhans
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Gender and the Creation of a Critical Discourse on Video Art

Uneven development characterizes the critical discourse on video art since the mid-60s. One reason is the erratic technological process of the field, with changing formats and media infrastructures. Another cause is the evolving institutional structures for training, creation, exhibition and distribution of video art. Uneven development also reflects the different origins of the video art community: performance art, visual arts, broadcast tv, and experimental film.

All of these factors influence the attempt to establish a critical discourse with the various voices (and relative authority and discursive powers) of artists, curators, distributors, arts administrators, and journalists joining critics (and, notably, none of these categories being exclusive to the others). The resulting discourse on video art has been significantly gendered, in many of the same ways that various critics have pointed out the discussion of modernism was gendered.

This investigation considers the institutional and sociological context for an aesthetic discussion that has constantly recirculated gendered values and concepts ranging from the clichéd validation of Nam June Paik as the “George Washington of Video Art.” to Rosalind Krauss’s landmark essay, “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism.” At the same time, the very significant presence of women video makers (in comparison with experimental film), and many women in the surrounding video artworld, creates the condition for gender being an always present concern in video aesthetics. The problems and promise of creating a discursive field for video art acknowledging women and feminist concerns while avoiding the traps of an essentialist model will be considered by considering some recent key critical writing by Chris Straayer, Martha Gever, Jane Gaines, Laura Kipnis, and others.